

WILKIE COLLINS AND *THE WOMAN IN WHITE*

INSCRIBED on a tombstone in Kensal Green Cemetery are the following words: "In memory of Wilkie Collins, author of 'The Woman in White' and other works of fiction." This inscription, written (as his will shows) by Collins himself, pays tribute to the book which probably stands highest among his works in the esteem of his readers.

No other name is marked on that stone, but with Collins lies buried Caroline Elizabeth Graves,¹ who died in June, 1895, at 24 Newman Street, aged sixty-one, apparently the widow of a George Robert Graves.² After Mrs. Graves's death Collins's grave was for a time under the care of Martha Rudd.³ These two women, Mrs. Graves and Martha Rudd, had shared Collins's bequest. To Mrs. Graves, Collins left his "gold studs and gold sleeve links" and some furniture, £200, and one moiety of the income from his estate; to Martha Rudd his watch and chain, £200, and a moiety of the income from his estate.⁴ After the death of Mrs. Graves, her share of the income was to pass to "her daughter," Elizabeth Harriet. In the record of her marriage (dated early in 1878) Elizabeth Harriet, called "Harriette Elizabeth Laura Graves," gave her age as 24, so that obviously she was born about 1854. The heroine of *The Woman in White* may, therefore, have been named after her. One cannot be entirely certain about her exact relationship to Collins: was she more than a foster daughter?⁵ After the death of Martha Rudd, her moiety of the estate was to go to the three children whom Collins acknowledges as his own: Marian, born at 33 Balsover Street, Portland Place, July 4, 1869; Harriet Constance, born in the same place on May 14, 1871; William Charles, born at 10 Taunton Place, on December 25, 1874. Martha Rudd and her children, at least for some time after Collins's death, passed under the name of Dawson.⁶

In a biography of his father, the artist Millais, who was a friend of

¹ Private information.

² Entry of death at Somerset House.

³ Private information.

⁴ Wilkie Collins's will.

⁵ Unpublished portions of Dickens's letters to Collins (written in 1861) apparently refer to the "Dutter" and "the Dutter's mama." A distant relative of the family into which Elizabeth Harriet (incidentally, Harriet was the name of Collins's mother) married mentions "Wilkie Collins's daughter." An unpublished letter written by Collins in 1880 appears to mention "Mama." Hall Caine, on the other hand, *My Story* (New York, 1909), p. 333, speaks of Collins's "affectionate adopted daughter."

⁶ The entry of the son's birth gives his name as William Charles Collins Dawson, the mother's name as Martha Dawson, formerly Rudd, the father's name as William Dawson, and the father's profession as Barrister at Law (Collins had received legal training at Lincoln's Inn). "Martha Dawson" was the informant.

Wilkie Collins, John G. Millais declares that a scene in *The Woman in White*—the scene which Charles Dickens considered one of the two most dramatic descriptions he could recall⁷—was based on experience.⁸ According to Millais, as his father and Wilkie and Charles Collins were walking one night, they saw a beautiful young woman dressed in white approach, hesitate as if in distress, and walk on, to be followed by Wilkie Collins. Collins later told his companions that the young woman, from a good family, had fallen into the power of an unscrupulous man who had subjected her to threats and "mesmeric influences" of an alarming nature. Kate Dickens, who married Charles Collins, Wilkie's brother, is said to have believed that it was the fugitive in white who afterwards lived with Collins.⁹ If this belief was correct, the young woman was Caroline Elizabeth Graves, whose name is listed in London directories under the same address as Collins's. It is noteworthy, if not especially significant, that *The Fallen Leaves*, one of Collins's most daring books (and one which incurred considerable censure because of the Socialist hero's befriending and finally marrying a girl of the streets), was dedicated "To Caroline."¹⁰

Though Millais's attempt to connect fact and fiction should be regarded with some skepticism, Collins's emotional experience may have affected his writing. More than once he introduces a character whose allegiance in love is divided.¹¹ The facts about his private life, hardly more than hinted at in print, must have been known in some circles. Not long after his death, when some friends proposed a memorial in his honor, in St. Paul's, the Dean and the Chapter reported adversely, stating that other than literary considerations had to be taken into account.¹²

It is no secret that Collins was fond of reading records of criminal cases,¹³ especially those written in French, and more than one commentator has mentioned casually that Collins derived from such a source

⁷ *The Recollections of Sir Henry Dickens*, K. C. (London, 1934), p. 54.

⁸ The passage by Millais is quoted in S. M. Ellis's *Wilkie Collins, Le Fanu and Others* (London, 1931), p. 27. ⁹ S. M. Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹⁰ In a letter to Louise Chandler Moulton, dated June 22, 1880, Collins speaks of his plan for continuing the story begun in *The Fallen Leaves*—a plan never to be carried out: "The married life—in the second part—will be essentially a happy life, in itself. But the outer influence of the world which surrounds this husband and wife—the world whose unchristian prejudices they have set at defiance—will slowly undermine their happiness and will, I fear, make the close of the story a sad one."

¹¹ As in *The Evil Genius* and "Brother Griffith's Story of a Plot in Private Life," in *The Queen of Hearts*. ¹² *The Critic*, April 12, 1890, p. 182.

¹³ Some of the "Cases Worth Looking at," in *My Miscellanies*, were drawn from J. Peuchet's *Mémoires tirés des Archives de la Police de Paris* (Paris, 1838).

suggestions for *The Woman in White*.¹⁴ The exact source, which seemingly has not been pointed out, was the celebrated case of Madame de Douhault, which Collins found discussed fully in Maurice Méjan's *Recueil des Causes Celebres . . .* (second edition, Paris, 1808, etc.),¹⁵ a book in his own library.

The relevant parts of this famous case may be briefly outlined: Adélaïde-Marie-Rogres-Lusignan de Champignelles (1741–1817) was married in 1764 to the Marquis de Douhault, and became a widow in 1787. Her father died in 1784. Madame de Douhault's brother, M. de Champignelles, obtained as much of his father's estate as he could, including some of the inheritance rightfully belonging to his mother and his sister. Of the mother's hardships under altered circumstances, another sister, abbess of Montargis, had some knowledge, and urged her sister Madame de Douhault to recover for their mother some share of the paternal bequest. Madame de Douhault thereupon planned a trip to Paris and announced her plan both to her sister and to Madame de Polignac, a correspondent. During a visit to some friends she expressed misgivings about the proposed journey, but her friends succeeded in calming her temporarily. Near the end of December, 1787, she left Chazelet, accompanied by a coachman, a chambermaid, and a servant. She stopped at Orléans, where she usually lodged at the house of M. Dulude (or du Lude), a nephew and an heir. On this occasion Dulude refused to receive her and induced her to go to the house of M. de la Roncière, a relative, whose mother had died suddenly eight days before at her son's house, about four leagues distant from Orléans. On January 15, 1788, on the eve of departing for Paris, Madame de la Roncière invited Madame de Douhault to go for a drive along the banks of the Loire. Soon after taking a pinch of snuff given her by Madame de la Roncière, Madame de Douhault suffered a violent headache which obliged her to return. Directly she fell into a deep slumber and was put to bed.

Madame de Douhault remembered all these events clearly, but what happened subsequently at Orléans was as indistinct as the events in an evil dream. She believed that she slept for several days; she woke to find herself in the Salpêtrière, under the name of Blainville. The supposed Madame de Douhault being dead, her estate was liquidated by M. de Champignelles and her heirs.

The correspondence of Madame de Douhault was for a time intercepted, but in June, 1789, by means of a woman whose favor she had

¹⁴ See, for example, Hall Caine's *My Story* (New York, 1909), p. 329.

¹⁵ The chief details may be found in III, 5 ff., "Affaire de Madame de Douhault"; VI, 5–92, "Suite de L'Affaire de Madame de Douhault."

won she succeeded in sending a letter to Madame de Polignac, and through Madame de Polignac's agency regained her liberty.

Une surveillante reçut l'ordre de lui remettre ses habits, dont l'indication était écrite sur un papier, et Madame de Douhault reprit son déshabillé blanc, le linge et les poches qu'elle avait en entrant à la Salpêtrière.

Madame de Polignac and her friends recognized Madame de Douhault; in fact, nobody at Versailles questioned her identity. When she went to the château at Champignelles, she was recognized by her own former domestics as well as by other people. The elaborate system of intrigue and defamation and the ingenious machinations by which Madame de Douhault's brother sought to discredit her attempt to regain her rightful status need not be reviewed here.¹⁶ The case dragged on for years. To her cause the son of a former member of her household, an advocate named Delorme, with whom Madame de Douhault lived for a time, in vain devoted his talent and his fortune.¹⁷

Obviously Collins took from the story of Madame de Douhault the idea for Count Fosco's plot, to rob Laura of her property by destroying her identity. Fosco and Sir Percival carry out the plan by burying Anne Catherick, Laura's half-sister, as Laura, and substituting Laura for Anne at the asylum from which Anne had escaped—details which Collins added to make his narrative more logical. Laura's instinctive dread of spending a night at her aunt's house in London, on her journey towards Cumberland, may correspond to Madame de Douhault's misgivings, though a novelist's foreshadowing needs no such explanation. Laura's imperfect memory of the events which preceded her trip to the asylum is possibly a bit more reminiscent of the French case. Finally, one wonders whether Madame de Douhault's "déshabillé blanc" did not suggest the detail from which the novel derives its title,¹⁸ in spite of Millais's story. To be sure, women in white are strangers neither to fiction nor to legend.¹⁹

¹⁶ A brief resumé of the case may be found in Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIX^e Siècle* (Paris, 1870), vi, 1157.

¹⁷ In an address to the Emperor in later years, Madame de Douhault is made to say: "J'ai soixante-six ans, j'existe au milieu de trente millions d'individus; et tous les rapports qui m'aliaient à la société sont brisés! Je ne suis civilement ni fille, ni épouse, ni Française, ni étrangère!" She finally died in wretched circumstances.

¹⁸ The choice of title was difficult. Collins explains that he smoked an entire case of cigars before finding a suitable title. Chewing the end of his last cigar, he looked at the North Foreland Lighthouse and thus addressed the building: "You are ugly and stiff and awkward . . . as stiff and as weird as my white woman. White woman!—woman in white! The title, by Jove!" The story is told in an article in *The World*, Dec. 26, 1877, pp. 4-6.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the White Lady of Avenel, a character in Scott's *Monastery*, and several legendary white ladies, see Coleman O. Parsons, "Association of the White Lady with Wells," *Folk-Lore*, XLIV (September, 1933), 295-305.

The use of a legal case may have influenced the form of the narrative.²⁰ In the first chapter of *The Woman in White* Collins explains: "The story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one person. . . ." Thus a section of the story is related by the character whose testimony seems most pertinent; at the same time this character, like the speakers in *The Ring and the Book*, reveals a good deal of himself. An early reviewer pointed out that since each witness tells only what he knows, his ignorance piques the reader's curiosity.²¹

In his introductory remarks to *Basil* Collins called the novel and the play "twin-sisters in the family of Fiction," the one "a drama narrated" and the other "a drama acted." In a dramatic novel like *The Woman in White* every incident is necessarily planned with care. One inconsistency of time in the first edition, subsequently corrected, did escape the author.²² In a dramatic novel, too, fatalism is often prominent. Dreams, a favorite subject with an author himself susceptible to weird dreams, foreshadow important events: The letter warning Laura against marriage with Sir Percival (Chapter XI of the first part) contains an account of an ominous dream. Before departing on the journey that ended at the asylum, Laura has bad dreams. More important is the dream of Marian Halcombe (Chapter VI in the second epoch) in which she sees Walter Hartright escaping pestilence, shipwreck, and other perils; the dream ends with the prophetic vision of Hartright at a tomb—as events are to prove, the tomb of Anne Catherick. And Anne Catherick herself enters the story like a figure in a vision:

There, in the middle of the broad, bright highroad—there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven—stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her.

²⁰ According to *The World* (*loc. cit.*), Collins had been asked to take up a case of wrongful imprisonment in an asylum. His short story "Fatal Fortune" deals with such a theme, which also interested Charles Reade. See *Readiana* (London, 1883), pp. 113–126.

²¹ *The Times*, October 30, 1860, p. 6.

²² *The Times*, *loc. cit.*, pointed out that Collins was "a whole fortnight out of his reckoning. . . . We could easily show that Lady Glyde could not have left Blackwater Park before the 9th or 10th of August." The fact that Dickens and the readers of *All the Year Around* did not observe the error, *The Times* adds, is a tribute to Collins's narrative skill. Collins acknowledged the error in a letter to his publisher, commenting, however, that "Shakespeare has made worse mistakes—that is one comfort, and readers are not critics who test an emotional book by . . . rules of arithmetic, which is a second consolation. Nevertheless we will set it right the first opportunity. . . ." The letter is quoted in Edward Marston's *After Work* (London, 1904), p. 85.

And thus she disappears:

So the ghostly figure which has haunted these pages, as it haunted my life, goes down into the impenetrable gloom. Like a shadow she first came to me in the loneliness of the night. Like a shadow she passes away in the loneliness of the dead.

The plot having been conceived, certain characters were essential. As Collins once explained,²³ a victim can hardly exist without a villain, and because the crime was too ingenious for an English villain, the author chose a foreigner. Since Collins had visited Italy in his boyhood, his choice of an Italian was natural. Moreover, Italy was the home of such organizations as "The Brotherhood." Fosco's tool, Sir Percival, was necessarily a "weak shabby villain."

To Count Fosco, justly regarded as Collins's greatest achievement in characterization, Collins gave a Falstaffian physique, because, he said, of the popular notion that a fat man could hardly be villainous. He accounted for Fosco's pets thus: "I knew a man who loved canaries, and I had known boys who loved white mice, and I thought the mice running about Fosco while he meditated on his schemes would have a fine effect." Fosco's devotion to his pets, like Long John Silver's fondness for his parrot, is a humanizing touch. To be sure, there are harsher qualities behind the Count's kindness: "The Count lit a cigarette, went back to the flowers in the window, and puffed little jets of smoke at the leaves, in a state of the deepest anxiety about killing the insects." Collins attributed to Fosco some of his own tastes and interests—for example, knowledge of the arts, fondness for Italian opera and good cooking, cosmopolitanism, criticism of English ways. His kind of humor is an apt vehicle for Fosco's egoistic gusto and self-assertive banter. Collins's admiration for Napoleon led him to attribute to Fosco the physical appearance of that dramatic character. There is something grandiose, too, in Fosco's *savoir-faire*, his skill in intrigue, his virtuosity in deception, his knowledge of human nature. So convincing is the portrait that one foreigner considered himself the pattern for Fosco, as Collins relates: He naturally insisted on receiving satisfaction for this insult, leaving the choice of swords or pistols to me as the challenged person. Information, on which he could rely, had assured him that I meditated a journey to Paris early in the ensuing week. A hostile meeting might, under such circumstances, be easily arranged. His letter ended with these terrible words: "J'attendrai Monsieur Vilkie [*sic*] avec deux temoins à la gare." Arriving at Paris, I looked for my honorable opponent. But one formidable person presented himself whom I could have wounded with pleasure—the despot who insisted on examining my luggage.²⁴

²³ *The World*, *loc. cit.*

²⁴ From "Reminiscences of a Story-Teller," *The Universal Review*, 1, 182-192.

Marian Halcombe writes of Fosco: "The one weak point in that man's iron character is the horrible admiration he feels for *me*." Fosco says of Marian:

With that woman for my friend I would snap these fingers of mine at the world. . . . This grand creature—I drink her health in my sugar-and-water—this grand creature, who stands in the strength of her love and her courage, firm as a rock, between us two and that poor, flimsy, pretty blonde wife of yours—this magnificent woman, whom I admire with all my soul

Readers have always shared Fosco's admiration. *The Woman in White* inspired several letters from bachelors who expressed their wish to marry the original of Marian.²⁵ Next to Fosco she is Collins's most memorable character.

In comparison with Fosco and Marian, Laura and Walter do seem rather colorless—virtuous enough but less interesting than some minor figures: Professor Pesca, Italian teacher of languages, as eccentric as Gabriele Rossetti (at one time perhaps the best-known teacher of Italian in London; and, by the way, a member of the *Carbonari* in his youth, as Pesca was of "The Brotherhood"), important at the beginning and towards the end of the novel; Mr. Gilmore, whose professional and individual oddities are well sketched; Philip Fairlie, a delightfully self-centered hypochondriac (doubtless partly inspired by the author's occasional irritations and drawn *con amore*)—"nothing but a bundle of nerves dressed up to look like a man." Nor can one forget Mrs. Catherick, atoning for an unconventional past by a respectability which rejoices at the clergyman's bow. The Dickensian touch, slight in most of these characters, is more marked in one or two of the servants.

When all is said, it is as a story that *The Woman in White* has most interest. It was the story-tellers—Scott and Cooper and Dumas—that Collins cared for most among novelists; and he usually chose to write in an unadorned style, relishing most such prose as that of Byron's letters. Since Collins himself belongs among the great story-tellers rather than among the great novelists, *The Woman in White* well opens with this thrilling sentence: "This is the *story*²⁶ of what a Woman's patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve."

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²⁵ *The World*, *loc. cit.*

²⁶ The italics are mine.